Making it Experiential:
Potentials and Barriers for Attraction Restaurants

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Flemming Sørensen
Jon Sundbo
Jens Friis Jensen
Lars Fuglsang

Roskilde University, Department of Social Sciences and Business, Denmark

Corresponding Author

Flemming Sørensen
Roskilde University, Building 25.3, Roskilde, Denmark
flemmiso@ruc.dk
+45 20 78 50 71
Objective/Background

The objective of this paper is to study how attraction themes can be integrated with and create experiential value in attractions’ restaurants. The study shows how both food production and consumption practices are important for this integration to succeed. The identification of several such practices emerged from a case study. The case is a medieval theme restaurant located within a medieval re-enactment center in Denmark. The case exemplifies how the integration of a restaurant into a specific theme of an attraction can provide opportunities for culinary tourist experience creation but also cause issues and be problematic for the profitability of the restaurant.

Figure 1: The medieval theme restaurant

Theoretical Framework/Literature Review

Food and meals have received increased awareness as an experiential value in tourism and leisure events, both in practice and research (Hall and Mitchell 2005, Croce and Perri 2010, Sundbo and Sundbo 2015).

During the last decades, there has been an increased focus on the production and consumption value of experiences (Pine and Gilmore 1999, Sundbo and Sørensen 2013), also for tourists and restaurant guests. Not only the food, but the total experience, including the room, atmosphere, the waiters’ dress, lighting etc., impact the guests’ appreciation of the visit and are income factors for restaurants.

Research has revealed how restaurants can use special themes to create experiences for guests (Mossberg 2003) and use the theme for storytelling, and thus marketing (Mossberg 2007). This may for example include the story about how the restaurant owner has immigrated from Italy and created the particular restaurant (Mossberg 2007) or it can involve serving medieval food in medieval surroundings as in the case of this paper. Gilmore and Pine (2007) argue that experiences should be authentic to have high value for customers. However, the theme and the story does not need to be historical and factually authentic as Mossberg (2003) have observed. People can accept a “fake” theme (such as pretending living and eating in the medieval age) as long as it is obvious that this is not the factual truth. It becomes an escapist experience (cf. Pine and Gilmore 1999), which also has value for consumers.

Research has paid little attention to attractions’ restaurants. In practice, attractions’ meal provision typically consists of standardised fast food and many attractions let external restaurateurs establish restaurants in the attraction simply because it is a needed service in the attraction. Rarely are the restaurants and meal provision related to the attraction theme. However, by theming the restaurants attractions may move the meal provision from a peripheral service to an integrated part of the total attraction experience (cf. Sundbo and Hagedorn-Rasmussen 2008).

Nevertheless, theming of restaurants in attractions may create challenges. It may for example require additional investments and other costs and thus be difficult to make profitable. There may also be conflicts between themed food and tourists’ demands for easy fast food. Possibly, the requirements of health
of the employees, volunteers and management of the attraction.

Observations were made in the restaurant as well as in the attraction. During the observations the researchers followed the general flow of visitors in the attraction and the restaurant to get a feeling of the overall visitor experience.

The interviews and observations highlighted a number of issues in relation to the organization, production and consumption of the culinary tourist experience in the restaurant. These issues were the focus of the workshop, which was inspired by the future workshop format. Thus, after a presentation of the findings from the interviews and observations, the workshop included a critique phase, a phantasy phase and a realistic suggestion phase. The manager of the attraction, the tenant of the restaurant and a potential future tenant participated in the workshop in addition to the researchers.

The workshop resulted in a number of possible initiatives. Before the following tourist season follow-up interviews were made with the manager of the attraction, the tenant and the museum director. The aim of these interviews were to get information about which initiatives were being implemented or were planned to be implemented.

Furthermore, it is the intention to follow the implementation of different initiatives during the 2017 tourist season and evaluate these.

**Method**

The study combines case study with action research. Specific data collection techniques include qualitative interviews, observations and a workshop.

The case is a theme restaurant located within a Danish attraction, The Medieval Centre, known for its reconstructed medieval buildings, ships, war-machines etc. and for its re-enactment. The restaurant, ‘The Golden Swan’, is decorated as a medieval restaurant and to imitate the medieval culinary experience visitors are seated on wooden benches, forks are not used, there is no artificial lightning and so on. The employees wear medieval clothes, and salute visitors ‘Gods peace!’ Additionally, like in the rest of the Medieval Center, there are strict rules about appearances. It is not allowed, for example, for employees or volunteers to wear glasses. Needless to say: the food is medieval.

Qualitative interviews were made with the tenant of the restaurant, a supervisor of the volunteers inhabiting the medieval village, and the daily manager of the attraction. The interviews focused on the production and consumption practices in the restaurant (of food, services and experience), how the restaurant was integrated with the attraction, thematically and logistically as well as the role of the employees, volunteers and management of the attraction.

Results and implications

First, interviews showed issues related to producing the theme, including for example, lack of resources for educating employees in re-enacting the theme. Thus, medieval food is served to the guests without explanation or re-
enactment. Furthermore, the chef regularly enters the room in modern cooking outfit breaking the medieval experience.

Second, issues were related to consuming the theme. For example, many old people cannot see the food in the dim light or sit comfortably on the benches. Additionally, profitmaking is limited because coffee, modern cakes and other items typically demanded in restaurants, but not present in the 15th century Denmark, cannot be served and consumed in the restaurant.

Third, issues related to the attraction’s experience logistics (production and consumption) are important. For example, the restaurant and the tourists have a time slot of less than one hour to serve guests (between knight tournaments and giant trebuchets are fired off).

Thus, conflicting practices of co-creating the themed culinary experience were identified: i) practicing a fake environment and limits to this when the theme is not re-enacted; ii) practicing dining in comfortable ways (sitting, seeing, and consuming the desired food), and iii) the flow and practice of creating the overall attraction experience. These conflicts led to co-destruction of value (Echeverri & Skålen 2011) for tenant, tourists and attraction.

The workshop illustrated how the issues were partly related to organizational challenges. The restaurant and the attraction functioned as two separate organizations with limited communication and integration.

The workshop resulted in different solutions to the conflicting practices. Some are now being implemented. For example, the tenant is now involved in the attraction’s management group to improve communication and integration between restaurant and attraction. Additionally, restrictions posed by the theme are slightly loosened, especially for group events. For example, subtle electrical lightning will be installed. Also logistical problems are lessened by improved logistics (e.g. new cash registers) and flows in the restaurant and, thus, of the attraction experience.

Thus, themed restaurants that are part of larger attractions have potentials for culinary tourist experience development. However, they also face restrictions, which can impact profitability of the restaurant when tourism and food production and consumption practices collide.

The case shows that to overcome restrictions and utilize potentials (turning co-destruction into co-creation) there is a need for close collaboration between attraction and restaurant in terms of exploiting the theme and in terms of logistically integrating the culinary experience with the attraction.

References


